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ABSTRACT

What made the teaching and learning experiences of a five-week pre-freshman composition primer course for minority students and a ten-session seminar on contemporary American literature for a group of teachers of English as a second language (ESL) from black and colored schools in South Africa so radically different for the professor who taught both courses? The answers transcended any obvious ones tied to the generic differences between the courses or the relative ages of the students in them. The answers lie at the nexus of politics, pedagogy, and language, and emerged from a heightened sense of language education as a political act. The typical freshman composition course unconsciously and counterproductively serves tradition-bound notions of cultural literacy. The crucial characteristic distinguishing the seminar participants from South Africa from the American minority students was their acute awareness of the sociological conditions and terms of their participation in the educational enterprise. In deciding to be teachers of English they had to accept the great political--hence pedagogical--compromise of the South African language policy. In the context of an oppressive culture they knew what it meant to have a right to your own language but to learn another nevertheless. They were in this crucial way better prepared to teach their minority students than teachers in American institutions. (RAE)

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"Discourse Communities, Rites of Passage, and the Teaching of English: South Africa and the U. S."

This paper is a report on what I as a teacher of composition learned from two courses I taught at Iowa State last summer. One of these was a five-week pre-freshman composition primer course for minority students who would have to deal with a full schedule of college-level courses for the first time in the fall; enrolled in this course were nine black students and one Hispanic, all there in an attempt to either confirm or strengthen their writing skills. The other course was a ten-session seminar on contemporary American literature for a group of teachers of English as a second language from black and coloured schools in South Africa, almost all of whom were either black or of mixed racial background; this course was a supplemental unit of a five-week ESL institute sponsored by the U. S. Information Agency and administered and taught by Iowa State's ESL staff.

Since three weeks was not enough time to do anything extensive with contemporary American literature, I designed my seminar in it with a rather specific and obvious focus, as my readings in Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Richard Rodriguez, Leslie Silko, and Toshio Mori (among others) revealed. These readings elicited a great deal of energetic and perceptive thought and discussion, discussion almost evenly divided among

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esthetic, pedagogical, and explicitly social or political questions. Despite the obvious opportunity for almost exclusively political analysis of the minority writers whose works we read, we never found ourselves compelled to such discussions. (Incidentally, because these South African teacher-students had been schooled in a tradition of colonial and British Commonwealth literature, many knew little of American writing and thus left my course in possession of an American literary canon dominated by minority figures.) My students declared this course an unqualified success on all levels, and I was quick to concur.

The composition course, on the other hand, was designed by members of our basic writing/writing clinic staff in consultation with the university's Office of Minority Student Affairs; it predictably involved a bit of early diagnostic writing and then a small handful of short and medium-length exercises and themes, ranging rhetorically among the personal/expressive, the persuasive, and the referential. The intention here was to give students experience with some of the key types of writing they might be asked to do in their upcoming courses. The students in this composition course were all highly motivated and had solid high school records, and three of them had been admitted to the freshman honors program. All the students earned C's or better and went on to their fall classes none the worse for having taken the course; I, however, was and still am convinced that while they had learned something, they had finally gained little. I never asked them as a group, but believe they would have agreed.

The question for me, of course, was what made the teaching and learning experiences of these two courses so radically different? I knew from years of teaching that the reasons transcended any obvious ones tied to the generic differences between the courses or the relative ages of the students in them (the teachers from South Africa were all college graduates).

The answer to this question became embarrassingly obvious to me as the two courses drew to a close and has been tentatively corroborated by some of the reading I've been doing since. The answer lies at the nexus of politics, pedagogy, and language, and it emerged from a heightened sense on my part of language education as a political act, as was made apparent by my South African students in the American literature seminar. The answer emerged from nagging insights on how the typical freshman composition course unconsciously and counterproductively serves tradition-bound notions of cultural literacy.

Consider for a moment the idea, long held and often expressed, of freshman composition as a rite of passage. That is, freshman composition is a common, if not universal experience of American higher education (Kinneavy). "This is a standard requirement in colleges all over the country," we tell our students, "and thousands of first-year students are learning to write in much the same way." Freshman composition can provide the student with some indispensible tools for taking other courses and thus opening up the opportunities of the academic community. "This will prove to be one of the most useful courses

you'll ever take," we tell them, "because you'll use what you learn here in almost every other course between now and graduation." Freshman composition is, or at least can be, a student's introduction to a time-and-experience honored rhetorical tradition, and thus an introduction to the idea of liberal education. . . . And so on.

All of this is, I think, accurate, and admirable in its intentions. But I'm not so sure it works, because our students, particularly our minority students, have no way or reason to know what it all means, and because we usually do precious little to tell them.

Take, for example, the notion of the "academic community"--sometimes simply referred to as "the college" or "the university." For social, political, and economic reasons perfectly obvious to anyone who has taught in one for more than a semester, an academic community is a heterogeneous gathering of smaller, specialized (and not unselfish) discourse communities, each with its own internal communities and discourse domains. The field of "English" alone has long since divided into specializations--composition, literature, ESL, linguistics, creative writing, theory, and so on. Likewise, the field of composition has split into basic writing, advanced composition, business and technical communication, rhetorical theory, and the like.

Of course even a cursory review of academic history reveals that these splits and divisions have typically resulted from

academic upheavals of earlier eras. And we know that the stresses of conflict, growth, and change among the disciplines abate only to emerge again. Yet how much of our own sense of the flux and growth of the academic dialogue do we convey to our students at any level?-- Typically, habitually, and even though we know better, we lead them to believe that all disciplines are firmly defined, that all discourse communities are established forever.

Take, for another example, the popular concept of writing across the curriculum. I think "the curriculum" is conceived in the singular most readily by administrators and others who are never required in the workaday academic (i.e., student) sense to negotiate it. Most of our higher-level talk about writing across the curriculum suggests a comprehensible plurality of literacies and rhetorics that can be understood as a coherent entity. Yet here again we know better: the curriculum is in fact not one but many curricula, each with its own articulable if somewhat exotic and arcane agenda, each with its own peculiar history, folklore, mores, and protocols. For the typical freshman, these curricula are a labyrinth of departments, programs, and courses, all populated by faculty who invariably (and even, we are reminded by students, in the same department) "look for different things" when they mark exams and papers. Indeed, from the quite natural (that is, innocent) perspective of the student of freshman composition, the various disciplines must come across as so many tyrannies. Such sobering observations reveal the uncritical

facility of the instructor who tells his or her students that taking the composition course will enable them to negotiate the maze.

When we ask the typical freshman, as I often do, what she expects to get out of college, we're often told "an interesting major, a marketable degree, a financially rewarding job, a new car, etc." Quite understandably, given our media-driven culture of narcissistic consumerism, she is interested in acquiring sufficient amounts of the kind of cultural property apparently verified in a college diploma and turning this property into yet other property that supposedly confirms her entrance into the dominant or majority culture.

Even granting the student's understandable-but-myopic goals, will freshman composition really help her reach them? Not when the misconceptions engendered or reinforced in it have negative impact on the student's ongoing relationship to learning in an academic setting. The way it usually is in the introductory composition class isn't what it ought to be.

What we in the college or university claim and try to do is give the new student a fundamental sense of the academic enterprise, through courses labeled "basic," "general," and "introduction to." In freshman composition specifically, we propose to make sure our students are functionally literate, in the academic sense. But being literate is not the same thing as understanding literacy, any more than being an academic guarantees that a person is concerned with good teaching, and

it's with respect to literacy that we come up short. We should be offering our students an introduction to literacy--an introduction not only to what discourse is, but also why and how it is made to happen.

To begin with, we need to make sure our students understand the practical reality of discourse communities, as defined by Glen Broadhead and Richard Freed in their recent article on discourse communities and sacred texts. That is, we must be sure to explain how discourse transactions are generated, and in fact shaped by discrete and indentifiable communities of individuals--"even" within the same college or university--who have a vested interest in what is communicated and how it's said. We must help our students "to anchor a message to a discourse community, to determine how the message acts within and is acted upon by the community" (163). We need to explain the nature and impact of cultural, institutional, generic, and situational norms of communication behavior.

We need also to analyze and question in the classroom our longstanding relationship to the "institutional voice" of privilege and power that characterizes educated conversation, as a growing number of commentators suggest. For example, Geoffrey Chase, commenting on the politics of student writing, urges that we now move beyond discussion of "the ways in which students are successfully initiated into various discourse communities," as in Broadhead and Freed, and concern ourselves and our students with "the historically constructed natures of the ideologies, values

and limitations which structure these particular communities" (14). And James Sledd observes that the problem is not simply or finally the unqualified teaching of Standard English in the schools, but rather "teaching it in wrong ways and for wrong reasons." That is, the "genuine issues" of writing instruction "are questions of [social and political] motives and methods, of deepest purpose and the best means to accomplish it" (172). We need further, Sledd concludes with a less-clear eye toward the fuzzy future, to "move beyond mere understanding" of linguistic domination "and of its consequences for our lives and work" (176). But how?

Robert Brooke suggests that we attend to the voices of classroom "underlife," the discursive subtext of our students' response to their educational experience, as a first step toward establishing dialogue and connection that is creatively disruptive within the learning process and not reflexively docile in the face of institutional givens. Chase, in the same vein, urges us to "encourage students to affirm and analyze their own experiences and histories, not without question, but as starting points for connecting with the wider culture and society" (21). Chase urges us to both demonstrate and encourage a liberating resistance to the "dominant ideology" and its controlling conventions, in an effort to displace passive accommodation on one hand and merely disruptive opposition on the other.

Presumably both Brooke and Chase concur with Myron Tuman, Patricia Bizzell, and others, whose calls for revision of the

pedagogical agenda derive from concepts such as pluralism, sharing, collaboration, dialectic, and negotiation. Bizzell herself calls for a not-yet-articulated "truly collaborative pedagogy of academic literacy, one that successfully integrates the professor's traditional canonical knowledge and the students' non-canonical cultural resources" (150). Presumably, she would find interesting an innovative literature/composition course at Indiana University, Bloomington (listed as L161-162), in which reading from the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women generates discussion and writing on gender and other stereotypes and on language habits, both spoken and written. And all of those I've cited would presumably join C. H. Knoblauch, who postulates that a combative classroom dialogue on the subject of language as a social practice can be the only truly effective transforming, liberating instrument. "A classroom informed by the assumptions of this [dialogic] perspective," Knoblauch tells us, "aims above all to situate students self-consciously within the objective social realities that impinge upon them, cause them to be what and who they are, and, in some circumstances, account for their domination" (135). More immediately, this "sociological perspective" might attempt simultaneously to "value informing students of the methods of inquiry and the processes of composition that schools distinctively enforce, revealing their characteristics in order to enable students to live productively amidst the expectations of the school world" and "subject the institutional reality of 'school' itself to scrutiny in the

context of other social realities" (137).

I hope you can see that I am about to turn from the unhappy recollection of my preparatory composition class to some closing observations on my much more successful class of South African ESL teachers, for it is from them that I receive, even now, the most convincing signals for how to proceed pedagogically from here in teaching minority students how to write.

In fact, it may be obvious at this point that the crucial distinguishing characteristic of the seminar participants from South Africa--albeit a characteristic initially obscured for me precisely because of its obvious and inescapable origins in South Africa's past and present realities--was their acute awareness of what Knoblauch would call the sociological conditions and terms of their participation in the educational enterprise. By this I mean that they were all aware that they were both products and beneficiaries of a system and canon of colonial education that they might well have a role in destroying by virtue of giving others a tool with which to evade and undermine its rule. By this I mean that in deciding to be teachers of English at all they had had to accept the great political--hence pedagogical--compromise of South African language policy: that while Afrikaans would never willingly be dethroned as the language of oppression, English <u>could</u> be the language of education and, thus, a face-saving option for the Pretoria government and a tolerable option and potential source of liberation for a native African whose tribal tongue would never become the <u>lingua franca</u> of world

discourse. By this I also mean that my seminar students from South Africa had had to negotiate with themselves, let alone their institutions and the Pretoria powers, even to choose to take leave from their teaching posts and participate in Iowa State's USIA-funded EFL institute in the first place. Given the hypocritical and opportunistic (and therefore morally, ethically, and politically problematical) nature of the U. S. government's South African policy, they must all have had to think twice about the negative implications of their acceptance of the opportunity offered.

In short, my seminar students from South Africa knew well before they had to confront Iowa, Iowa State University, or my classroom what it means to identify, account for, and mistrust the problematical elements of a white-dominated culture, no matter how friendly, collegial, and well-meaning. They had lived all their lives in the long shadow between personal needs on one hand and the imperatives of privilege, prescription, and propaganda on the other. They had long since learned how to engage in an enabling, self-affirming dialogue and to make a tentative, wary truce where only violence and division seemed possible. They knew what it finally means, in the context of an oppressive culture, to have a right to your own language but to learn another nevertheless. They were in this crucial way better prepared to teach <u>their</u> "minority" students than I was to teach mine.

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